

Turn and Face the Strange by IndigoJones

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Summary: A peek into the thoughts of characters in Hawkins before and after the mind-altering events of November 1983.

1. Karen, Nancy, Jonathan

Karen

A long time ago, many years before the thing that they were not supposed to talk about occurred, Hopper and Lonnie arrived at Hawkins High School wearing matching black eyes and split lips. The halls buzzed with the sound of whispered speculation. *Lonnie caught Hopper necking with Joyce in the woods behind her house. Hopper jumped Lonnie when he heard him call Joyce a stupid bitch. Joyce arranged to meet both men at the same time just to goad them into fighting.* Karen didn't think any of that was true, or that what really happened was any of her business, but she was curious just the same. It was hard for her to believe that Lonnie had been cruel to Joyce. Those two were just crazy about each other, and Lonnie was one of the most popular boys in school. Practically everyone in Hawkins knew him and what a charming young man he was. She wasn't surprised that Hopper had been in a fight, she had seen more than a few of his tussles in the hallways between classes, but Karen never saw Hopper go after a boy who didn't deserve it.

Once, when she was late for cheerleading practice after school, she came out of the locker room alone and suddenly found herself being herded into the corner of an empty hallway by Joey Martin. Karen had politely declined his invitation to homecoming the day before and thought she had been kind enough to him, yet there she was being pinned against the wall by his hips. She tried to push him away when he tangled one of his hands in her hair, and shrieked when he shoved his other hand up under her sweater, but Joey didn't stop pawing her until Hopper appeared from who-knows-where and hauled him off by the neck of his shirt. The last thing Karen saw as she ran out to the field was Hopper shoving Joey into the locker room and following him in. Karen never told anyone about what happened in the hallway that afternoon, but the next day she brought a batch of fresh apple fritters to school in a paper bag. She had stayed up late preparing the ingredients and gotten up early to bake them, and she felt jittery from lack of sleep and the memory of the dark corner in that lonely hallway. Karen found Hopper by his locker and shyly handed him the pastries. She waited while he opened the bag

and stuck his nose into the top, sniffing appreciatively.

"I added some extra cinnamon," she said – as if the extra cinnamon explained everything that happened and everything he had done and the overwhelming weight of her gratitude towards him. Hopper nodded at her, smiling with one side of his mouth. And that was that. Karen never asked what happened in the locker room, but Joey Martin limped for a week and never even looked at her again. So she couldn't believe that Hopper would fight with Lonnie without a good reason. But, Karen supposed that Joyce was probably reason enough. Joyce was a doe-eyed waif with a smile that was half-helpless, half-sly, and could send just about any boy in school into a state of stuttering foolishness. Karen couldn't find it in herself to be jealous of Joyce the way a lot of girls in her grade were. She thought their jealousies were petty and misplaced. Joyce only had eyes for Lonnie, after all. Besides, Karen had ambitions beyond high school boys. Her cheer captain had promised to take her to a fraternity party one day soon. Karen felt her heart skip with excitement at the thought of it. At a fraternity she could meet college men with careers and prospects – maybe even meet a man with whom she could make a home and start a family. A reliable husband, a nice house, her own kitchen where she could work on new recipes, her own children to love. It could be perfect. Karen could make it all perfect.

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After it happens, the thing they weren't supposed to talk about, Karen drops off enough baked goods at the police station to equal to Mike and Nancy's weights combined. Over the next few weeks there are loaves of bread heavy with nuts and raisins, savory scones, eight different types of cookies, flakey pastries sweetened with glaze, pies piled high with fruit and cream. She never asks Hopper if he likes them, never even tells him what she is doing, but Flo lets her know what kind of treats make their way from the kitchen into his office the fastest, and Karen writes a list inside the cover of her cookbook to keep track of what he likes for future reference. She plans to bake him treats on every holiday, on his birthday, and on Mike and Nancy's birthdays for as long as she is able. Karen knows it's not enough. It can never be enough to thank him. But she can never speak of what he did, or what was almost lost to her, and so she tries

to do what she can.

Nancy

A few years before it happened, the thing that broke her heart and her brother's as well, Mike asked Nancy to play Dungeons and Dragons with him. Nancy felt she was too old to play dress up, but Mike pleaded and whined incessantly that they absolutely needed Nancy to play the elf or else the quest and everything else in his life would be absolutely ruined. Tired of her homework and lonely, Nancy pretended to be more annoyed than she really was and made a fuss about finding her old box of dress-up clothes in the back of the basement closet. Dragging it into the bathroom, she changed into an old nightgown of white silk and the wings Mom made for the ballet recital in which Nancy danced the part of the little fairy who brought all the flowers in a magical garden to life. She hoped to God no one besides Mom remembered that. As if everyone in her class needed more ammunition to make fun of Nancy *Prissy Princess* Wheeler.

"Princess Pigtails," Steve Harrington had whispered last week from his seat behind hers in class as he tugged on one of her braids. Nancy had felt her face and neck burning crimson, and, to make it worse, Tommy guffawed and leaned over to reach across the aisle, yanking on her other braid. When Nancy hissed in pain, Miss Leighton saw them and made both boys stay after class to be assigned extra homework as punishment. "Thanks a lot, *Princess*," Tommy spat at her in the cafeteria that afternoon, and had made a point of loudly calling her a priss every day since. Nancy would pretend not to hear him and would purse her lips to stop herself from crying while people laughed at her. She also stopped wearing her hair in pigtails despite Barb's gentle accusations that she was letting *them* change her. But, she reasoned as she tucked her dark curls under the cap of a wig, next year she would be in high school, and things could be different there. It could all get better for her. Madame Lena at the dance studio said she was old enough to dance ballet *en pointe* now, and Mom promised to take her to Indianapolis to buy toe shoes if she got A's on her report card – which she would, so Nancy should be able to move up to the older girls' class soon. There she could get to know the upper grade girls who were more grown up and sophisticated. And

(maybe, perhaps, if she was lucky), a grown up, sophisticated boy would finally notice her, and he would think she was beautiful and ask her to dances and kiss her by the front door in the moonlight. Just like a movie, like a fairy tale. The synthetic hair fell to her waist in yellow waves and she turned to admire the effect of the blonde hair in the mirror. She used to love playing dress-up.

When Nancy rejoined the boys, she read the lines of script that Mike wrote out for her and watched their gleeful enthusiasm for the imaginary world they created. As she tried hide her amusement at an impassioned argument between Dustin and Lucas over whether or not an elf should be allowed to wear fairy wings, she felt school, the pigtails, the laughter, and everything in real life that was making her life miserable just slide farther and farther away. She smiled and played with her little brother, and for a while she could escape into his fairy tale, too.

Then the basement door opened and Jonathan Byers clunked awkwardly down the steps, calling out for his brother. In an instant Nancy felt her body freeze and her face burn. Jonathan was already in high school, and now he was going to see her dressed up like a stupid elf (*with* fairy wings – Mike had finally put his foot down on the issue just to end the argument), and playing fantasy games with a bunch of little boys. Her life was over. Nancy's eyes darted around the basement for something to hide behind as Jonathan reached the bottom stair and started talking.

"Hey Will. Change of plans, buddy. Mom asked me to come get you."

"I thought Dad was coming to get me later."

"We'll talk about it at home, ok?" Jonathan's shoulders were hunched and he sounded angry. Nancy prayed that he was too distracted to notice her, but as Will tried to pull his older brother into the basement she saw his eyes dart over towards her and then quickly bounce back to Will as the little boy spoke up again, entreating.

"Jonathan, you should play with us. You can be the elf lord, and you can marry Nancy and rule over the hidden elf kingdom. We'll teach you how to play. Nancy's really good at it." Nancy would have to ask to be homeschooled. She could never show her face at Hawkins High,

ever. Jonathan didn't look back at her, he just reached out and gave Will a gentle push towards the stairs.

"Will, come on. I've got to get back to work. Let's go, buddy."

"Alright," Will replied, apparently resigned "Bye, guys. Don't go any farther without me. Bye, Nancy, thanks for playing with us. You look really pretty."

"Bye, Will," Nancy whispered, not trusting her voice. And then she heard it - the swift exhale under the breath of Jonathan Byers. He laughed at her. Nancy felt her lips pursing into a thin line and commanded herself not to cry. She didn't want Jonathan to see she had heard him. She didn't want him to know.

As soon as she heard the front door close Nancy left the boys in the basement and ran up to her room. Taking up the scissors from her desk and grabbing the hank of synthetic hair in one fist, she chopped off the long golden tresses of the wig. When Mom asked why she had ruined such a pretty thing she used to love, Nancy said she just wanted to experiment with a new style without cutting her own hair. But the truth was that Nancy wanted to destroy that stupid wig, and cut off the childish impulse to imagine life could be like a fairy tale. She was tired of being a silly girl people laughed at. She wanted to grow up.

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After she goes there - after she sees it, after it kills Barb - Nancy never stops running through the dark wood. Mike tells her the monster is gone. Hopper assures everyone it is all over. "You're home now," says Mom. "You're safe now," says Steve.

"You don't know that," is Nancy's unspoken reply to each of them. Now she lies awake for hours at night with the lights on until her exhausted mind slips reluctantly into unconsciousness. She won't turn up the volume on the radio or TV, worried that she might not be able to hear something scratching through the walls. She asks Steve or Mom to drive her everywhere she needs to go. There's an old croquet mallet under her bed, and a newly acquired pocketknife in her purse. She does all this to make herself feel safe, but none of it matters. The

upside down is always there. She will never be safe again – she knows now she never was. Monsters aren't fairy tales. They are real, and now Nancy will always be running from them.

Jonathan

In the year before it happened, the nightmare that almost tore everyone he cared for away from him, Jonathan Byers had a lot on his mind – the drudgery of high school, extra shifts at work, the prospect of college, the fact that his father was an asshole, the gnawing fear of what would happen to his mom and Will if he left for New York, a panic that he would never be able to get out of Hawkins – but none of that had stopped him from noticing Nancy Wheeler. They had never been friends, but their paths crossed sometimes around their little brothers, and he used to see her a lot at school. Jonathan had a gift for observation (*the gift of the outcast*, he would wryly think to himself), and he had gathered a precious store of knowledge about Nancy. He knew that she was a smart and determined student who hated drawing attention to herself in class almost as much as she hated getting an answer wrong. He saw that she was inseparable from Barb, who was the only person in school Nancy appeared to be comfortable around. He knew that she was polite and kind, but also shy and nervous around most of her classmates. He knew that her eyes tended to smile before her mouth did, and that she blushed whenever she noticed a boy looking at her. Jonathan knew he wasn't the only guy who had started to notice Nancy. He also knew that the Hawkins Dance Studio, which he passed on his way to and from work, had a large picture window next to its front door, and that Nancy was there three nights a week. He tried not to make it a habit, but he would spot her sometimes through the glass; a flash of movement, a body whirling, leaping, bending impossibly with a grace that was somehow gentle and fierce. He never lurked, and did his best not to stare, but sometimes he couldn't help himself and his glance would linger too long. He knew he shouldn't look, because if he kept looking he would see something he was not supposed to see, but he always looked anyway.

One evening as he walked past the window and let his eyes drift towards its light, he saw Nancy sitting in a chair by the door with her

feet propped up on the edge of the seat. She was hugging her knees to her chest and looking down. When Jonathan's eyes followed the direction of hers, he saw a streak of angry red and white blisters across her toes. The pale skin of her feet was torn with scabs and scars and open wounds - one of the nails was a ghastly shade of purple. His glance skittered away and fell on a pair of pink ballet slippers that were discarded in a pile on the floor. Shoes just like the gold charm Nancy wore around her neck, except the insides of the silk slippers were stained brown and red with splotches of blood – the hideous reality of the pretty charm Nancy wore over her heart. He knew he had already lingered too long, but he risked a glance back to her face and saw that her eyes were unfocused, as if she had cast her mind elsewhere to a place outside of her pain, somewhere far away where he could not follow. Jonathan suddenly understood that he knew nothing about Nancy Wheeler, and never would. How could anyone truly know a girl like her?

He used to think that maybe, possibly, if he asked Nancy to the movies she would go with him, but on that night he decided that he shouldn't be spending money on movie tickets anyway. Jonathan knew he was infatuated, but he also knew that infatuations faded, and he would eventually get over it.

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After that week of desperation and chaos, Jonathan finds that he has learned a lot about Nancy Wheeler. Some revelations came as a surprise; her dead aim for one, and the fact that her initial trust in Steve was no more unfounded than her suspicion that Jonathan was a creep (Jonathan learned some things about himself as well). He saw the way her brow playfully tilts when she is amused, and how devastatingly quiet she can be when she is angry. He also learned forbidden things that he never expected to know, like the feel of her body pressing close against his, the heat of her breath on his neck, and the awful shuddering of her ribs when she was sobbing in the grip of his arms. He knows what her skin smells like after a shower, the texture of her bed sheets, and the sound of her voice whispering his name. He has felt the brush of her hair against his face, and the shape of her delicate fingers gripped in his hand. But more intimate than all this, he knows that she would risk her own life for a chance

to kill the thing that took her friend. And now Jonathan is no longer sure that he will eventually get over it.

Author's Note: Thank you for reading! Here are a few points of clarification if you are interested:

- The title, "Turn and Face the Strange," is from the David Bowie song "Changes," released in 1971. (It is possibly a bastardization of the lyric "turn and face the strain," but it's hard to tell from listening, and, obviously, "strange" just works so deliciously well here.)

- Although we don't yet fully know Hopper's history, I am writing under my own theory that he was born and raised in Hawkins, moved to the big city at a young age, married, began a family, and had a successful career in law enforcement. After Sarah's death and his spiral into a debilitating depression, he decided (or was convinced by his friends) to move back to his quiet hometown in the hopes of settling into a healthier lifestyle.

- Although I find it an interesting topic to write about, I do not condone Jonathan's behavior towards Nancy in this fic or in the beginning of the show.

- And the standard disclaimer: I do not own or profit from Stranger Things, its characters, or Netflix.

2. Steve, Mike, Joyce

Steve

Before that night and the worst thing to ever happen to him, Steve was sure he knew how the world worked. Life was predictable. It was actually pretty boring. Life was easy, life was dull. Well, classes weren't easy, but high school didn't really matter. In fact, Steve was fairly confident that nothing in Hawkins mattered. Occasionally he would wonder if life was always going to be this way, or if he would ever find something outside of Hawkins good enough to chase, but he never thought about it long enough to come up with any answers. That was why he had to make his own excitement, and usually a combination of booze, girls, and troublemaking was enough to satisfy him for a night or two. But then he started to notice Nancy, and began to wonder what his life could be with a girl like her – how things could change with a smart girl, a complicated girl he couldn't really figure out. And his life did change with Nancy, but not in the way he thought it would. Life turned out to be unpredictable, after all.

That awful night was also the best thing to ever happen to him. Not only because he didn't run – because he was there for Nancy and Jonathan when they needed his help – but also because he realized that maybe he had been wrong about everything. If boring is *not* watching a demon monster crawl through a ceiling, he'll take it. If boring is sitting on a couch while Nancy rests quietly his arms, then boring isn't so bad at all. Steve understands that many of the things he used to take for granted – being inside a warm house on a snowy night, the smell of cakes baking in the kitchen, the sound of laughter echoing up from the basement – now seem to be the most important. All of it matters to him now.

Mike

Before Will left and Eleven arrived, Mike thought he knew what pain was. Pain was metal tools at the dentist's office and needles at the doctor's. Pain was wiping out on your bike and eating dirt, or that time he accidentally pressed his hand against the hot stove top while

following his mom around the kitchen. He thought he understood what sadness was, too. Sadness was being ignored by all the girls in class and being pushed around by boys behind the school building. Sadness was his mom not having time to listen to him because Holly needed her more than he did. Sadness was Luke Skywalker finding out his father was the bad guy. Pain and sadness hurt, but they always went away eventually. They were easily swept aside by his friends – by the games they played, the movies they watched, the stuff they collected. Pain and sadness were part of life, but a small part. Not the important part.

Mike knows now that he was wrong. After Will returned and Eleven left, Mike realized that pain has nothing to do with needles – it is about not being able to help someone you care about. Pain is watching them be scared, and not being able to save them. Pain is understanding that someone has gone away from you forever. And pain doesn't hurt your skin, it hurts something inside of you instead. Sadness isn't what he thought it was, either. Sadness actually comes from hoping for something that can never come true, and feeling that hope die a little bit every day. And sadness doesn't leave you. It can be buried, or maybe forgotten for a little while, but it is always there under the surface. Just like the Upside Down.

Joyce

Before the morning Will wasn't in his bed, Joyce thought that her life was chaotic. She was barely earning enough to keep a roof over their heads, Lonnie always somehow found a way to make her life difficult at every turn, she could never keep the house clean – hell, she could never even find her keys. She thought that chaos was the endless pile of dishes, the constant noise of two boys in the house, her anxiety about Jonathan's education, worrying about how a sensitive boy like Will was going to survive in the world, and the constant eyes of the town watching, judging, and waiting for her to mess up again.

In the minutes, hours, and days after Will isn't in his bed, Joyce learns what chaos truly is. Chaos is driving to the police station because you can't find your son. It's standing alone in a morgue, and knowing that someone is lying to you. Chaos is not being able to reach your baby, and the black, black terror of knowing he is in

danger. Chaos is watching reality shred itself apart before your eyes. Chaos is screaming what you know is the truth to people who don't believe you. It's looking at Jonathan and seeing doubt and fear in his face. Chaos is finding a monster in your home.

Now that Will is in his own bed every morning, the mess, the noise, the expense of having two boys in her dusty old house is a joy – a fragile, shining joy that pierces and soothes her soul every waking moment. Her heart is bursting over with love, happiness, and thankfulness for this second chance. She wants to make it right again more than anything, but in a small corner of her mind lurks chaos – always there, and always waiting.